

## How to make a good impression on the telephone



### Why are telephone skills so important?

- First impressions are extremely important – they can be the make or break of a customer relationship, and will set the tone for later communications
- Meeting the expectations of external customers is key to the survival of any organisation in the increasingly competitive market
- Meeting the needs of internal customers enables the organisation to be effective as a whole, and to provide the service to external customers

Effective telephone communication not only requires the ability to say the right words, but also the ability to project a positive image and to make a good first impression... and it is usually the “little things” that can make a big difference to how the first impression is formed and either confirmed or disproved. Jan Carlzon (former president of Scandinavia Airline Services) coined the phrase ‘*moments of truth*’ to describe the occasions when a customer comes into contact with a company, and thereby has an opportunity to form an impression... so whether it’s the first time you have contact with a customer on the telephone, or part of an ongoing relationship, you should be aware that everything you say and do, and how you say and do it will become a ‘moment of truth’.

### Why is telephone communication unique?

A well-known way of describing the components of face-to-face communication is in terms of words, music and dance. It is generally believed by linguists and psychologists that when communicating face-to-face, we do so in the following proportions:

- 7 % Words**    Content, clarity, precision and directness
- 16% Music**    Speed, intonation, pace, timing, flow, rhythm, emphasis, tone and power
- 77% Dance**    Movement, space, gestures, eye contact, posture, touch and expression

This means that a staggering 93 % of our communication does not come from the words we say - but from the tone of our voice and from our body language... so imagine the potential for misunderstanding when communicating on the telephone: the ‘dance’ element is removed, and you’re left with just the words and the music to derive the full meaning. It is therefore vital that anyone wishing to make a good impression on the telephone becomes particularly adept at using positive language and fully utilising the positive musical elements of their voice.

## How do you use 'music' to portray a positive image?

The 'musical' elements of your communication are particularly important for conveying sincerity, interest and helpfulness – as well as for enhancing understanding. The various tonal qualities that can make all the difference include:

- **Pitch** – This varies depending on the tightness of your vocal chords, which can be because of their natural shape, or caused by intense feelings. When you are excited, very happy or fearful your chords tighten and your pitch goes up. When you are low or depressed your vocal chords relax and your pitch goes down.
- **Resonance** - This is the richness and depth of your voice, and is also largely determined by the shape of your vocal chords and your chest. However, as with the pitch of your voice, you can work at changing your resonance, as many singers, actors and public speakers do. A thin high-pitched voice normally communicates indecisiveness, weakness and timidity, whereas a deeper more rich voice can communicate strength and self-confidence.
- **Volume** - The volume of your voice has both positive and negative connotations. A loud voice can be associated with confidence, enthusiasm and self-assuredness. However it can also reveal anger or bullishness, aggressiveness or an over-inflated ego. A soft voice can reveal shyness, a lack of self-confidence and a feeling of inferiority, however it can also be seen to indicate a trusting and caring person.
- **Tempo** - The speed at which words are spoken also conveys strong messages. People who speak fast are normally excited, however rapid speech can also convey insecurity. Slow speakers can be received as either thoughtful, indifferent, or sometimes lacking intelligence or ideas.
- **Rhythm** - Rhythm is largely about emphasis – which is important for drawing the other person's attention to the important elements of what you are saying, and for maintaining interest. You can also change the meaning of statements by changing the emphasis. For example, "*It's time to go*" means it is time to go. Whereas "*It's time to go?*" means: is it time to go?

Remember that without the added visual information, your vocal quality may give messages that do not actually reflect how you feel, or do not give the image you would like to portray. For example, if an in-coming call interrupts you when you're concentrating on an important task, you may be asked if you're OK, as you sound low!

So if you're unhappy with the sound of your voice – or feel that you don't always use it to the best advantage, you could try one or more of the following:

- Spot people with voices that you think are particularly effective and try to analyse how they are using the different musical elements to good effect
- Become more aware of how you sound - get others to listen to you, or use a tape recorder when you're speaking on the telephone, and ask for some honest feedback
- Try sitting differently – being upright will allow more oxygen to enter your lungs, and breathing more deeply will enrich the quality of your voice
- Practice changing the element of your voice that you are unhappy with when you're alone, or speaking with friends/family so you become used to sounding different
- Read children's stories out loud to practice stressing important words and sounding interested and confident
- Think about why you might lack confidence and seek ways of overcoming any specific skills or knowledge gaps

## How do you use 'words' to portray a positive image?

Fundamental to effective communication is how to express yourself using words that are clear and appropriate. In order to convey a positive image, it is important to use positive language. This applies at all times – even in negative situations.



There are many situations in which it can be simplest to use the first words that come to mind to get across your message. However, the power of words should not be underestimated. Even if it doesn't seem important, everything you say will become a powerful indicator to the other person of how they should feel about you and the company, and how they should respond. Here are some common examples of negative words that could be expressed more positively:

- “You shouldn't be doing x,y,z” becomes: *“Have you tried a,b,c?”*
- “What's the problem?” becomes: *“How can I help you?”*
- “Sorry, you'll have to fill in a form” becomes *“Please can you fill in this form?”*
- “This doesn't seem quite right to me” becomes: *“Let me check this again”*
- “I can't get you an appointment until...” becomes: *“I can offer you an appointment on ...”*
- “You'll have to go to our other office” becomes: *“Our other office will help you with...”*
- “Sorry for keeping you waiting” becomes: *“Thank you for holding”*

We recommend that you take some time out to identify any negative comments, or messages that you regularly give over the telephone, and try practicing using more positive alternatives as above.

## Would you or others in your team benefit from training in telephone skills?

We hope that you'll find these tips useful. However, most people derive huge additional benefit from the interaction, practical exercises and valuable feedback that face-to-face training gives. H2 offers bespoke training in telephone skills from just £62 + VAT per person per day

Here's what some satisfied customers said after attending our training in telephone skills:

- *“I'd never been on one of these courses before - it has made me realise how to answer the telephone professionally, and how to come across more confident”*
- *“Excellent – the trainer's skill was in helping us to highlight good and bad practice, and to develop a more consistent and professional approach to the telephone”*
- *“The course looked at current habits and offered new ways to approach problems”*
- *“My 'faults' have been corrected in a very positive manner - I think everyone who speaks frequently on the phone would benefit from this course”*

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